

American

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Secretary Kerry, Ban Ki-moon Discuss North Korea, Syria, Iran

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer |
14 February 2013

Washington — Secretary of State John Kerry and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon held talks on the recent North Korean nuclear test, the “desperate humanitarian crisis” caused by the Syrian civil strife and the resumption of nuclear talks with Iran.

“We know above all that the enormous array of the world’s challenges that we face requires huge cooperation between all countries and the United Nations, and the United Nations plays the vital role in that collaboration,” Kerry said moments before the two met privately February 14. It was Kerry’s first meeting with Ban since he became secretary a week ago.

Kerry opened his remarks with journalists on the February 12 nuclear weapon test by North Korea, calling it an “enormously provocative act that warrants a strong, a swift, and a credible response from the global community.”

Kerry said the nuclear test, which is North Korea’s third known test, poses a threat to the peace and security throughout the Northeast Asia region. He pledged to increase cooperation with the Six-Party partners — China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Russia — and also the U.N. Security Council to respond appropriately.

President Obama said after the nuclear weapons test was announced that these types of actions do little to make North Korea more secure.

“Far from achieving its stated goal of becoming a strong and prosperous nation, North Korea has instead increasingly isolated and impoverished its people through its ill-advised pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery,” Obama said in a White House statement.

Ban told journalists alongside Kerry at the State Department that the action by North Korea “was a direct challenge to the international community.” He added that he recently called on the Pyongyang leadership to give up pursuing a nuclear weapons program and instead focus on building crucial infrastructure for the North Korean people and address pressing humanitarian needs.

Kerry said they also planned to discuss the ever-increasing humanitarian crisis in Syria following almost two years of civil strife across the country. The United States will continue to press the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power. The United States

will also provide support to opposition leaders who respect the rights of the Syrian people.

“I want to learn from the secretary-general what he thinks we can do to best assist in the effort to try to change President Assad’s calculations, to stop the bloodshed and begin a peaceful political transition towards a democratic future for all the people of Syria,” Kerry said. “We will also consult on the desperate humanitarian situation.”

Kerry said that as many as 70,000 people have been killed in Syria since fighting began March 15, 2011, in the aftermath of nationwide demonstrations. The consequence of the violence has been the displacement of thousands of refugees, which creates dislocations and burdens on neighboring countries that are prepared to receive them, he added.

“We need to rally the international community in response to the U.N.’s appeal for more funds in order to deal with the humanitarian assistance for those suffering inside Syria as well as those people who have been dislocated,” Kerry said.

Ban said U.N. relief agencies are mobilizing humanitarian assistance for growing numbers of refugees and displaced people both inside and outside of Syria — as well as both government-controlled areas and opposition-controlled areas. Ban said he and Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi are calling on the U.N. Security Council to be united and speak and act with one voice in dealing with the Assad government.

Kerry said diplomatic talks with Iran over its nuclear weapons development program will resume later in February in Kazakhstan. “I want to reiterate that these talks can only make progress if the Iranians come to the table determined to make and discuss real offers and engage in a real dialogue,” he added.

Nations that operate peaceful nuclear programs generally do not have problems proving they are peaceful, Kerry said. And negotiators are not going to engage in a delay-after-delay process.

The two also indicated that they planned to discuss climate change, the next steps in Mali, Somalia and the Middle East peace process.

Crop Preservation Focus of State Dept. Forum

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 14 February 2013

Washington — Preserving crops from the time they are harvested until they reach consumers is the focus of a February 19 State Department forum for diplomats from Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, researchers, and business executives.

Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs José Fernandez will lead the forum.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), by 2050 when the world's population reaches 9 billion people, demand for food will be 60 percent more than the current demand. Because more production alone is not enough to meet that demand, stopping food waste is crucial, FAO says.

Currently, 1.3 billion tons of the food produced in the world is lost or wasted every year, or about one-third of what is grown, FAO says.

The causes of post-harvest loss vary depending on weather, region and crop. Common causes in the developing world include a lack of proper storage and processing equipment; transporting food in open, unrefrigerated vehicles; lack of information about the problem and its solutions; and limited access to credit so farmers can purchase adequate equipment, the State Department says.

Through its Feed the Future program, the United States is stepping in to address the issue. The U.S. Agency for International Development has asked to review proposals for projects that link renewable energy technologies with farmers and agribusinesses in low-income countries involved in improved food processing and storage. In January, USAID said it had joined innovation giant DuPont and the government of Ethiopia to help smallholder farmers in that country reduce their post-harvest losses by as much as 20 percent.

Public awareness of post-harvest loss and food waste has significantly increased over the last two to three years, said Steve Sonka, who heads the ADM Institute for the Prevention of Postharvest Loss at the University of Illinois.

"The world can grow enough seed and oil grains to serve the needs for food, feed, fiber and fuel," said Sonka, who will be on a forum panel discussing how to move from post-harvest loss research to implementation through technologies like stronger grain bags and bins.

Feed the Future is President Obama's global initiative to reduce hunger and poverty.

The ADM institute is an international hub for evaluating, developing and disseminating information about economically viable loss-reduction technologies. It was established in 2011 with a \$10 million grant from Archer Daniel Midlands Company, a global producer of grains and grain products.

More information about Feed the Future and the ADM

Institute for the Prevention of Postharvest Loss is available on their websites.

EU, U.S. to Launch Talks on Comprehensive Trade Deal

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 13 February 2013

Washington — In his first State of the Union address since winning re-election in November, President Obama proposed a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the United States and the European Union that would strengthen what is already the world's largest economic relationship.

"We will launch talks on a comprehensive Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the European Union — because trade that is fair and free across the Atlantic supports millions of good-paying American jobs," the president told U.S. lawmakers February 12.

The goal of the arrangement is to support mutually beneficial job creation, economic growth and international competitiveness.

European Commission President José Manuel Barroso told reporters in Brussels February 13 that talks to create the free-trade alliance would begin by the end of June, and that the negotiations "will set a standard not only for our future bilateral trade and investment, including regulatory issues, but also for the development of global trade rules."

Economic ties between the United States and the European Union account for half of the world's economic output and nearly \$1 trillion, or one-third, of the global trade in goods and services. In a February 13 joint statement from Obama, Barroso and European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, the three leaders said they are committed to making the economic relationship "an even stronger driver of our prosperity."

The proposed partnership would advance trade and investment liberalization and address regulatory and other nontariff barriers.

"Through this negotiation, the United States and the European Union will have the opportunity not only to expand trade and investment across the Atlantic, but also to contribute to the development of global rules that can strengthen the multilateral trading system," the statement says.

According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), the trade deal would address costly "behind the border" nontariff barriers that are impeding the flow of goods and services, and promote greater compatibility in regulations and standards.

The agreement could affect global trade by developing rules and principles on issues such as “market-based disciplines for state-owned enterprises, combating discriminatory localization barriers to trade, and promoting the global competitiveness of small- and medium-sized enterprises,” USTR said in a February 13 press release.

The proposed deal follows more than a year of exploratory discussions in a high-level U.S. and EU working group on jobs and growth. The group consulted with business, environmental, consumer, labor, government and other key stakeholders in developing its recommendations.

In its final report, the working group “determined that an agreement that addresses a broad range of bilateral trade and investment policies, as well as global issues of common interest, could generate substantial economic benefits on both sides of the Atlantic,” USTR said.

President Obama Offers Sweeping Second-Term Agenda

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer |
12 February 2013

Washington — President Obama, in a nationally televised address to the American people, pledged to gradually withdraw 34,000 troops from Afghanistan over the next year, further reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and launch a revamped immigration system.

Obama also announced plans to launch talks for a free-trade agreement with the 27-member European Union. The president also pledged that the United States will remain “a beacon to all who seek freedom.”

“We can say with confidence that America will complete its mission in Afghanistan and achieve our objective of defeating the core of al-Qaida,” Obama said February 12 in his seventh address before a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

It was Obama’s first State of the Union address since winning re-election in November 2012. It provided a platform for the president to challenge the Congress to work with him for his second-term agenda that includes significant domestic and international goals.

The United States has already reduced its troop level in Afghanistan by 33,000, and is working to transition security responsibilities fully to Afghan troops by the end of 2014.

“This spring, our forces will move into a support role while Afghan security forces take the lead,” Obama said. “I can announce that over the next year, another 34,000

American troops will come home from Afghanistan. ... By the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over.”

By the end of February 2014, the United States will have approximately 32,000 troops remaining in Afghanistan to help support, train and equip Afghan soldiers, and further troop reductions will continue through the end of 2014 as the Afghan National Army assumes full responsibility for the nation’s security. No final determination has been made about how many U.S. forces will remain in Afghanistan after 2014; the president continues to consider various options with his military advisers.

U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan will be given full latitude and flexibility in determining the pace of troop reductions. The plan gives military planners a sizable force for the next fighting season, which ends in September and October, the White House said.

In an agreement worked out between Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai in January, Afghan troops are scheduled to move into the lead security role beginning this spring as part of an accelerated transition plan.

Without citing specific numbers, Obama promised Americans he would continue his efforts to make the world nuclear-free, a crucial component of his national security agenda. He first announced his goal for a nuclear-free world during a speech in Prague in June 2009.

In the months after that speech, the president negotiated the New START Treaty with Russia to limit deployed nuclear arsenals to approximately 1,550 by 2018. White House officials said February 12 that the president intends to take that number down further, and the president said he will engage Russia to seek further reductions in both nations’ arsenals.

After North Korea conducted its third nuclear weapons test earlier February 12, Obama pledged to renew efforts to convince the reclusive regime to abandon plans to develop a nuclear arsenal and the long-range missiles to deliver them.

“Provocations of the sort we saw last night will only further isolate them as we stand by our allies, strengthen our own missile defense, and lead the world in taking firm action in response to these threats,” he added.

Likewise, Obama said Iran must recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution to end its efforts to develop nuclear weapons. “A coalition stands united in demanding that they meet their obligations, and we will do what is necessary to prevent them from getting a

nuclear weapon," the president said.

To boost American exports and trade while also supporting an expansion of jobs in the United States, Obama said he intends to complete negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership with Asia-Pacific nations.

Obama also announced plans to launch comprehensive talks for a Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the European Union, "because trade that is free and fair across the Atlantic supports millions of good-paying American jobs."

In addition, the United States will join with allies to eradicate extreme poverty in the next two decades by connecting more people to the global economy and empowering women, Obama said. And the United States will work to help save the world's children from preventable deaths, and realize the promise of an AIDS-free generation.

Obama told Congress that real immigration reform means stronger border security, putting more U.S. Border Patrol agents on the southern border with Mexico, and further reducing illegal crossings.

"Real reform means establishing a responsible pathway to earned citizenship — a path that includes passing a background check, paying taxes and a meaningful penalty, learning English, and going to the back of the line behind the folks trying to come here legally," he said.

"And real reform means fixing the legal immigration system to cut waiting periods and attract the highly skilled entrepreneurs and engineers that will help create jobs and grow our economy," he added.

On domestic issues, Obama proposed government action in education, manufacturing, infrastructure, clean energy and climate change, and limitations on firearms.

Landsat Liftoff Opens New Chapter in Earth Observation

11 February 2013

Washington — Landsat 8 lifted off from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California February 11, beginning a mission to constantly collect data about surface conditions on Earth. The mission puts more sensitive instruments in orbit, opening the latest chapter in Earth observation.

Landsat 8 will be "continuing the 40-year legacy of preserving Earth's natural resources from space," said the flight commentator as an Atlas V rocket lifted off the launch pad into a clear California sky at 10:02 a.m. Pacific Standard Time. Within minutes of launch, the satellite separated from the rocket and quickly achieved a speed

greater than 6 kilometers per second, soaring over the Pacific Ocean at an altitude of almost 300 kilometers. Within a half hour, the craft was nearing Antarctica.

The satellite is the eighth in a scientific program that began in 1972.

"Landsat is a centerpiece of NASA's Earth science program," said NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, watching the launch from the ground. "This data is a key tool for monitoring climate change and has led to the improvement of human and biodiversity health, energy and water management, urban planning, disaster recovery and agriculture monitoring."

The Operational Land Imager and the Thermal Infrared Sensor are two instruments onboard the newest entry in the Landsat series. These instruments are more advanced than those orbiting in earlier versions of Landsat and will allow more sensitive observations of the land and its changes over time.

The U.S. Geological Survey collects and manages the data returned by Landsat satellites, archiving the material and making it available to all over the Internet.

U.N. Workers in Syria Are Heroic, State Dept. Official Says

11 February 2013

Following is a blog post by Anne C. Richard, the assistant secretary of state for population, refugees, and migration, on February 11. There are no republication restrictions for use by U.S. embassies.

U.N. Bravery in Syria

By Anne Richard

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration

During a recent conversation with Syrians living in the Turkish refugee camp of Islahiye, some asked: is it true that the U.N. is handing over hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Asad regime? We assured them that this rumor, circulated on social media by opposition supporters, is not true. It is based on a misunderstanding of how the U.N. raises funds and distributes assistance. Aid workers are risking their lives, and doing so with international aid financed in part by the United States, to help Syrians suffering from the brutality of the Asad regime. But this rumor coupled with erroneous reports of American indifference has led to misguided criticisms of the international aid effort. So let's set the record straight.

The truth is that aid workers are performing heroically to help the Syrian people. The Asad regime may be attempting to pacify parts of Syria and so is now allowing

aid into some areas. As a result, relief workers are crossing shifting battle lines and facing very real and very deadly threats.

The stories of civilian carnage are by now familiar. Innocent men, women and children have been caught in the crossfire, massacred by air assaults or militias, and preyed upon by hostage-takers and criminals. Refugees crossing from Syria into northern Jordan told me of "barrel bombs" packed with explosives and dropped on towns and cities in the south that killed or maimed indiscriminately. Doctors, medical clinics and even bakeries have been targeted to undermine the opposition. Sixty thousand people are estimated to have died and many more have been wounded. It is a deadly arena for relief workers, as well, and several have been killed.

John Ging, Operations Director in the U.N.'s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, led a team of emergency directors from seven U.N. agencies into Syria in January. The government would not let them bring aid over the borders from neighboring countries into contested areas, so they were testing the limits of their reach inside Syria. They visited Damascus and the surrounding area, traveled to the cities of Homs and Dara'a and crossed the conflict line north of Homs into Talbiseh.

At the same time, High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres and his team were working day and night to oversee a risky operation. A convoy of trucks traveled through Syria to reach the far north of the country where 45,000 displaced civilians were living under flimsy tents in makeshift camps beyond the reach of aid workers. A 200-ton convoy moving through the landscape of war is an obvious target. So, the aid convoy traveled in the open, requiring delicate negotiations with the regime in Damascus and opposition factions in control along the route, before reaching Azzaz on January 31 and delivering 2,000 tents and 12,000 blankets.

When the UNHCR trucks arrived, local Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) workers offloaded them and distributed the aid. Some critics have questioned whether the SARC is in the pocket of the Asad government. The truth is that SARC is not monolithic, and loyalties of SARC staff vary, probably mirroring the loyalties of the communities in which they live. It's also true that SARC workers and volunteers throughout Syria have bravely lived up to the humanitarian tenets of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, delivering aid and helping war victims.

At a January 30 conference in Kuwait, some 60 countries came together to pledge \$1.5 billion in more humanitarian aid for the U.N.'s efforts, with the United States making a pledge of \$155 million. When added to previous funds to address the crisis, the United States is providing a total of

\$365 million. I met with representatives of one government that were skeptical of the U.N.'s abilities to maneuver in the dicey landscape of Syria. This government was therefore channeling its aid directly to refugees in countries outside Syria - something that I applauded as equally urgent and helpful, although I urged them to coordinate aid with the U.N. to avoid duplicative and wasteful giving. Amidst this generosity, other governments are limiting their aid in response to the crisis. This is a grave mistake. We need more contributions to help those in need, not less, and we must support U.N. agencies and others as they struggle to reach some of the most challenging locations on earth. Failing to do so maligns the courageous efforts of these aid workers and ignores the suffering of innocents experiencing hell-on-earth in Syria.

Anne Richard is the assistant secretary for population, refugees, and migration at the U.S. State Department.

Scientists Detect Signs of Life Deep Beneath Antarctic Ice

11 February 2013

Washington — A scientific team has drilled through Antarctic ice to a subglacial lake system, recovering samples that they believe contain bacteria, a discovery that could open new doors in understanding the resilience of life.

The Whillans Ice Stream Subglacial Access Research Drilling project (WISSARD) brings together experts with various specialties to study the rivers and lakes deep beneath Antarctica's massive ice sheet. Satellite radar and other advanced mapping technologies have revealed the subglacial system only in recent years. The lakes vary in size, but the largest has been measured at roughly 19,000 square kilometers, comparable to Lake Ontario in the Great Lakes system of North America.

Successful drilling and retrieval of samples from this isolated ecosystem "hails a new era in polar science, opening a window for future interdisciplinary science in one of Earth's last unexplored frontiers," according to a statement from the U.S. National Science Foundation, the institution funding the project.

Though extensive testing must still be conducted, the researchers believe the samples retrieved from the lakes may contain microscopic life that has developed and survived in a world completely alien to life on the planet's surface. Learning more about life forms that survive without light or nutrients as we know them could lead to further understanding of survival in other extreme ecosystems and, perhaps, in icy worlds elsewhere in our solar system.

This expedition is the result of a decadelong planning process, involving scientists from eight U.S. institutions and four international institutions. Scientists and engineers of the WISSARD team have drilled 800 meters through Antarctica's glacier for the first time, retrieving water and sediment samples. The team expects these samples have not had contact with the atmosphere for millennia.

The WISSARD expedition has also collected video surveys of the lake floor and collected data on the chemical properties of the waters and sediments, which will fill out the profile of this previously unexplored world. Scientists will analyze the data in hopes of understanding more about subglacial microbial life, climate history and contemporary ice-sheet dynamics.

Even while WISSARD scientists are eager to learn about subglacial life, they approach the work cautiously in order to protect the ecosystem and prevent the introduction of any contaminants from the surface.

The hot-water drill used to penetrate the glacier was specially designed and developed for this purpose. It was fitted with special features to prevent contamination and ensure retrieval of clean samples.

The project brings together specialists in geoscience, biological science and planetary science. International members of the team come from the University of Venice in Italy; the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia; the Volcanological and Seismological Observatory of Costa Rica; and the Antarctic Research Centre at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

U.S. Exports Reached Record High in 2012

08 February 2013

Washington — The Department of Commerce has announced that the export of U.S. goods and services reached an all-time record during 2012, growing \$92.6 billion for a total of \$2.2 trillion as the U.S. economy continues to make progress toward President Obama's goal of doubling exports from their 2009 levels.

In a February 8 statement, Acting Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank said record levels of exports were recorded in a variety of areas, including capital goods; automotive vehicles, parts and engines; consumer goods; and travel and tourism.

The U.S. economy is a crucial engine for growth in the global economy, and movements in its gross domestic product, international trade levels, employment and monetary policy are closely monitored by world governments and international financial markets. World

currency markets also monitor U.S. economic activity because the U.S. dollar acts as the reserve global currency that underpins the 24-hour-a-day foreign exchange market that links to the flow of global investments.

Data from the Commerce Department's Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis showed that the 2012 growth in U.S. exports of goods and services outpaced the growth of imports of goods and services both in dollar value and percent change for the first time since 2007, with exports growing by \$92.6 billion or 4.4 percent.

"Not only did exports outpace the growth in imports for the first time since 2007, but exports have helped support the creation of over 6 million private-sector jobs over the past 35 months," Blank said.

During 2012, U.S. export levels reached record levels with more than 70 countries, including major emerging markets and 11 free-trade-agreement partners.

The U.S. trade deficit improved by \$19.5 billion in 2012, from its 2011 level of \$560 billion, and that amount is at its lowest level since January 2010 and well below the pre-recession high of \$753 billion that was recorded in 2006.

Approximately 95 percent of global consumers are outside the United States. In his 2010 State of the Union address, President Obama called for a doubling of U.S. exports from their 2009 level of \$1.57 trillion by the year 2015. Under the National Export Initiative, the Obama administration is working to remove trade barriers and encourage American businesses to find new markets to promote economic recovery.

In her statement, Blank said the National Export Initiative "has helped U.S. companies by leveling the playing field and providing access to new markets," and that the work to increase exports "is more important than ever — particularly with global economic headwinds affecting the rate of export growth across the board."

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